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ABSTRACT

Dewey's concept of education as growth can be useful in conceiving of student success. Dewey regarded immaturity as potential for continuous development of both children and adults. His concept of "plasticity" as the capacity to alter present actions because of previous experiences is crucial to the notion of growth. A continuous accumulation of information becomes the background for further inquiry and the basis for the formation of habits, including the habit of learning. Dewey's philosophic leaning--toward pragmatism and evolutionism--did not lend itself to fixed schemas of values, ends, and aims, but concentrated on the developmental process. All educational endeavors share the goal of progress, but Dewey did not respond to questions surrounding the purposes and ends of growth; nor did he equate growth with a specific set of values. The problem still remains as to what final treatment is appropriate for growth. (FG)

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Patrick Socoski

SUCCESS AS GROWTH: BUT GROWTH TOWARD WHAT?

One of the overarching concepts in Dewey's educational philosophy is the concept of growth. This paper will begin by explaining Dewey's idea of the notion of education as growth. An attempt will be made to do more than simply restate the Dewian position. Rather, the task will be to rethink this metaphor as its central concepts are explained. I will assume that task also requires addressing the relatedness of the growth metaphor to Dewey's larger philosophy in order to give an impression of its function within an interrelated and interconnected system. As the title suggests, I will then attempt to link growth conceived in this manner with the notion of student success. "Success," or in this case, "student success" is assuredly a problematic term having a panoply of definitions. Its meaning is undoubtedly affected by the purpose of the educational program in question, with its particular formulation of goals, expected achievements, outcomes and objectives. This becomes further complicated when these conceptions of success are inadequately formulated or are of conflicting or questionable character with respect to each other.

Nonetheless, at the risk of muddling matters further, I will propose a definition of success that attempts to provide as broad a base as possible for concensus on the part of those who are defining student success.[1] It is that student success is something that occurs when a change takes place within the <u>being</u> of a student. The change is one having positive effects upon the student, and that occurs as the direct or indirect result (and hopefully,

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[1] I stress "student" because, certainly, there are other types of success (success of the school); teacher success; educational success (success of education as an enterprise), etc.

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not in spite) of an educational experience she/he has had.[2]

Thus, the purpose of the paper will be threefold. First, it will explain what Dewey meant by "education as growth." Next, an operational definition of success will be formulated. Finally, as a way of juxtaposing sutdent success with growth, I will consider how Dewey's conception of growth is a useful way in which to conceive of student success. Inherent in this final consideration is the need to treat some problems that arise in Dewey's theory. The conclusion will take account of these problems and suggest ways with which to deal with them.

I must emphasize that neither in the conclusion nor elsewhere will the paper offer a justification for why Dewey's conception of education as growth should be the paradigm for student success sine qua non. The purpose of the exercise is merely to show that Dewey's rubric could be a useful way of conceiving of student success. I therefore offer no claims that Dewey's idea that education is growth provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for a conception of student success.

I. EDUCATION AS GROWTH

Crucial to society's perpetuating itself is the determination of the activities of the youth who will form that society. This is the framework within which growth, or, as Dewey states it, the "cumulative movement of action toward a later result"[3] occurs. Growth, then, plays a key role in sustaining and perpetuating society. Within this, the impetus is provided by a condition of immaturity, which Dewey regards positively as the ability to progress. The aim, however is not to reach an ideal, finished end. Rather, the

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[2] I define "educational experience"in the same highly generalized way that Dewey does. That is, any human experience, regardless of degree of formality, is at least potentially educative.

[3] John Dewey, Democracy and Education (NYC and London: MacMillan, 1944), p. 41.

power to grow functions as a comparative standard for evaluating the continuously developing character of both adults and children.

Regarding the developing characters of children, the active, constructive role Dewey grants them is the result of two traits they possess--dependence and plasticity. Dependence, like immaturity, has a positive and constructive function. Dewey feels that the child possesses an inborn ability to elicit the aid of adults, a skill wielded in proportion to their own impotence to control their environment. As a result of this, a web of social interdependence is created by the child. The attainment of interdependence, rather than independence, is an important distinction for Dewey. His social philosophy emphasizes the importance of shared experiences within the workings of the democratic community.[4] The human infant seems especially well-endowed for this sort of participation.

Dewey's willingness to grant this type of social capacity to the neonate appears to border on mawkishness at times, especially when he makes such statements as "few grown-up persons retain all the flexible and sensitive abilities to vibrate sympathetically with the attitudes and doings of those about them."[5] His denial of anative egoism in children runs against the grain of Freud and other developmental psychologists. However, these inaccuracies do not seriously weaken the thesis that interdependence is a positive faculty or ability, necessary for growth within society.

Dewey terms the special mode required by the child for growth "plasticity," which is the capacity to alter present actions due to previous experiences. This is perhaps the most crucial concept involved in the notion of growth because it connects with Dewey's schema for the acquisition of knowledge in general.

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[4] Ibid., Chapter 7, especially pp. 81-83.

[5] Ibid., p. 43.

Put concisely, knowledge is gained by specific inquiry and accumulates in our experience. As a result, it becomes the background for further inquiry. This inquiry is an essential activity, in which we engage during both day-to-day problem solving and in more structured scientific research.[6]

Plasticity, then, allows us to gain something from our experiences, something we put to use in future behavior. It's not surprising that Dewey regards it as the very capacity to form dispositions, and, stemming from them, habits. The formation of habits is an indispensible manifestation of growth. In order to see why this is so, we must clarify Dewey's use of the term, as well as the related but different notion of habituation. Upon completion of this, we will be in a position to consider the types of habit whose cultivation are educationally relevant.

Dewey states that habit is a type of executive skill. It is the body's utilization of the environment to accomplish a task. It is imperative to include this active sense of controlling the enviornment within the notion of habit. Otherwise, we merely accommodate ourselves to the environment inertly. This is habit qua habituation. It is certainly true that we are not always concerned with changing the entire environment. For this reason there will usually be some habituation present as we engage in the active task of purposefully controlling the environment through our habits.

What uniquely enables the human child to develop habits of thinking and habits of conduct, i.e., the habits of learning, is prolonged infancy and dependence. Dewey states that while animal young apply, as it were, automatically their instinctive tendencies when they perform activities, the human being can try various approaches. When learning an action or solving a problem, different responses are attempted, each adapted to the specific situation.

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[6] Ibid., Chapter 14.

The animal,on the other hand, has a "pre-programmed" set of responses, that are efficient for accomplishing the task, but inflexible. The human, through a kind of trial and error process learns a task, and, more importantly, is able to apply these strategies in future situations in a developmental sense. This is what Dewey means by the habit of learning. Thus, the human being starts out with an unorganized mass of reflexes or instincts and through his plasticity and prolonged nurturing period, attains growth through the development of habits.

We mentioned both habits of thinking and habits of conduct in discussing the habits of learning above. It is possible to mention them in the same connection because they are two sides of the same coin for Dewey. A habit is an inclination that represents both types of skill involved in its execution, the intellectual (thinking, observing, reflecting) and the efficient means for carrying it out (physical technique). The intellectual or mental aspect, however, "holds the rein," in adapting and applying the habit, thus utilizing it for further growth.

The absence of this internal mental aspect creates fixed habits. These are habits disconnected with consciousness to the degree that we lose our ability to control them. "Bad habits" are an extreme case of fixed habits that are so divorced from the mind that their consequences are invidious to the individual. These mindless repetitions, even if they express high motor ability, signify a lack of plasticity and, therefore, inhibit growth. For this reason, care must be taken to maintain an environment where a maximum of intelligent activity is possible.

Intelligence keys upon the concept of will. Will shares with growth the characteristics of requiring an intelligent awareness of our actions as well as requiring an ability to execute them mindful of their purposes and outcomes. Since growth places responsibility in the hands of the person for the

selection of choices that maximize the opportunity for optimum future value, the notion of will becomes crucial.

Will connotes foreseeing an outcome, as well as holding on to that outcome with a conviction. This abiding concern with ends parallels the expression of growth as habit, where the intellect controls and modifies the execution and application of the habit according to what it has learned from past experiences.[7] Dewey uses the example of a weak-willed individual to illustrate the importance of the intellect. Weak-willed individuals are out of touch with the end results of their acts and, thus, follow inappropriate paths for their completion. He says explicitly in reporting the importance of intellect to a strong will: "That the primary difference between strong and feeble volition is intellectual, consisting in the degree of persistent firmness and fullness with which consequences are thought out, cannot be overemphasized." In both habit and will, then, we attain the end by structuring the theme.

The thrust of Dewey's statements centers around the concept of development. Not only is education development, but life itself is. Within life, growth is the key process. This means two things for our consideration of success. First of all, it is clear that Dewey's notion is a process conception rather than a product type. In fact Dewey goes to great lengths to avoid specifying or discerning any outcomes for educational endeavors. The reason for this becomes clearer if one recalls that he spent great energy upon defying what had been known as "preparation education," a form of education that instilled a static set of objectives upon the student, in order to prepare them for adult duties. His philosophic inclinations--pragmatism, evolutionism--forbade the construction or positing of absolute, fixed schemas for considering

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[7] Ibid., p. 128.

values, ends, or aims. (I shall have more to say about this later).

Secondly, if student success is conceived as growth, several implications result for educators. From the above, it is evident that growth has specific modes for different types of learners. Both child and adult have abilities to grow. For the child, in order to insure success, we must guard against a negative treatment of immaturity, encouraging conformity to a set environment, and fostering fixed habits. The adult should retain the characteristics of plasticity, openmindedness, and so forth. What we must avoid for both is any attempt to approach a fixed goal, since growth is only relative to more growth in Dewey's view.

Educators, according to Dewey, would do well to keep aware of the positive instincts of their students, which are best brought out in dealing with the novel. Thus, a teaching methodology which solely stresses drill and inhibits personal involvement is anathema to education as growth. The result of such a strategy is conformity, which ignores individual differences in learners.

To avoid the above, the teaching method itself must lack rigidity. Dewey says the end of growth "is outside of and beyond the process of growing."[8] Instituting a flexible strategy strikes one as being very difficult in a system of mass education, measured and evaluated by standardized criteria. Some external pressure will always need to bear upon an external end in classroom education. Dewey appears too idealistic in assuming that general schooling can function according to objectives which are individually adapted to the internal conditions of each student. However, teachers concerned with facilitating student success can guard against the extreme case of total rigidity of method, lack of concern for pupil interest and involvement, and the

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[8] Ibid., p. 51.

expectation of nothing more than conformity to ensue from their instructive efforts.

But what can we say about the legitimacy of the paradigm itself? In the above and elsewhere I have accepted more or less unquestioningly the notion that "student success" is effectively articulated by Dewey's growth metaphor. Success, I initially defined as a change taking place within the being of a student having positive effects upon him or her, and that occurs as a result of an educational experience they have had.[9] I also maintain that the purpose of this paper was not to give a justification of why Dewey's metaphor is the exhaustive or even the best treatment of success. However, there are, I feel, some fairly apt reasons for a consideration of growth as success. I will now list these, not for the sake of providing proof of their correctness, but to present them in such a manner that (hopefully) they will appear to be intuitively sound.

The first point that suggests a linkage is that growth places responsibility upon the student to learn in a way that maximizes the worth of his future experiences. If student success means that a good is achieved for the student, then it seems fitting that he take on the responsibility for it. As to the question of whether success involves increasing the value or meaning of future experiences, I suspect that few would disagree that it should, though they may have questions as to what this increased meaning of experience is and how it can be attained.

Furthermore, while the subject is on possible objections, it is clearly possible to counterpose that all the references to student success involved tacit changes in the individual at the expense of the community. While no reason exists for such a conclusion in Dewey's thinking (since

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[9] I'm aware of the fact that this definition, as it stands, is not without problems. Besides the need to elaborate upon the meanings of the individual terms contained within it, there is a particular need to explore what these "positive effects" are, why they are desirable, and even why they should occur within the individual, as opposed to occuring within a group, in some collective manner.

democracy is always the standard for evaluating social relationships, which includes the individual's relationships to others), this paper's own definition of student success requires a defense. In this regard, I propose that the evolution or progress (whenever it happens) of society and the individual are roughly equal, although this is a disputable point. The point is, however, that one can assume that some correlation exists between the attainment of individual (student) success and the improvement or betterment of society as a whole.

Returning to the reasons for the synonymity of growth to success, I think the most persuasive point arises from a consideration of plasticity, the ability to change. For, I think that in all legitimate conceptions of growth, whether they involve an observable quantifiable change in behavior or an alteration of affective or attitudinal components, the necessity for an ability to change is paramount. All educational endeavors share the goal of taking someone from x to y. In teaching, the intention is that another learn. This occurs as a criteria of teaching or as an end-in-view (in Deweyian terms) of the teaching activity. R.S. Peters defines education as "reformation," wherein something worthwhile has been transmitted in a morally acceptable manner. Both of these examples depend upon the presence of plasticity, or the ability to change before their intended results can begin to take place.

There are certainly more than two aspects of Dewey's conception of growth that have a possible relationship to what success is. Time does not permit me to include them here. In the interest of thoroughness, the paper should also investigate whether Dewey qualifies growth in any way that deters or conflicts with our present interpretation of success. The same caveat applies here also. However, even without pursuing these two lines of investigation, I think it is still possible to conclude that the education as growth metaphor

can contribute to our understanding of student success.

If the assumption stands that education as growth adequately articulates a conception of success, problems still remain with the notion of growth itself. Since Dewey's instrumentalism (as well as his naturalistic tendencies) forbade the postulation of permanent norms or absolute values, there are no given, fixed, or absolute ends. Of course, some values are intrinsic, and as such are not objects of judgment. These are not absolute or fixed, but are at the time without the need of being compared to other values.[10] Other values, the instrumental type, come into play when a choice or a ranking needs to be made, and figure prominently in the reconstruction of problematic or conflict-laden situations. An end, therefore, is not a value transcending the activity desiring it. They are

> foreseen consequences which arise in the cause of activity and which are employed to give activity added meaning and to direct its future course.[11]

Ends, consequently, are ends-in-view, and cannot be separated from the means. The means is the line of action, the concrete process of actualizing the desired or contemplated end. But, one asks, are there any results of moral deliberation that fit into the schema as ends? Since Dewey stipulates that "growth itself is the only moral end,"[12] I suggest that there is good reason feel inclined to appropriate growth as a chief value.

Growth seems to take on characteristics of value when Dewey qualifies growth in terms of itself by saying that the growth which fulfills the moral end is that growth which makes possible further growth. Therefore, when there is conflict (between, for example, the pupil's developing needs and the existing educational entities) impulse, then intelligence, redirect activity, with the

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[10] John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct, p. 225.

[11] John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 177.

[12]

possibilities of growth in mind. But, to what ends and purposes are growth and reconstruction themselves to be put? Dewey gives no response to this question, other than saying, that growth is only relevant to more growth. In fact, growth is written about often as if it were an essential value, as when he determines the values of social and political institutions by the degree to which they produce growth, or when he conceives growth to be the development of an internally balanced human nature.

Even though growth is not treated as a determinate state of perfection or as any final end, one wonders why Dewey did not attempt to explain why all values (both intrinsic and instrumental) are spoken of in terms of growth.

The response to this question that first comes to mind is that Dewey is concerned with a metaethical consideration of growth and, therefore, is unobligated to highlight specifically what growth entails. Furthermore, in holding that moral standards vary from society to society, value decisions are necessarily made on the basis of what is best for the human welfare in that <u>particular</u> community. Thus, one must concede that this kind of pragmatic interpretation is not likely to fix or assign absolute or essential values. But the problem still remains as to what <u>final</u> treatment is appropriate for growth.

I will conclude with the conjecture that Dewey did well to not equate growth with a specific set of values or to tie down the notion in some other terse way. It is consistent with his ethical philosophy to suppose that there will be social and political interpretations of growth, such that the climate into which it is received will always alter it.

Furthermore, with respect to values themselves, there is a danger in following the specific approach (elucidating individual values). The attempt

to make values explicit can lead to a stymying of the entire procedure of thinking about values. We recall that when Socrates queried Euthyphro about the definition of piety, he was unable to define the term. He had claimed that he understood piety, but in the end was unable to state the necessary and sufficient conditions for a pious act.

It seems to me that when we talk about specific values for guiding our behavior we risk what took place for Euthyphro. Values become objective, explicit options, options we feel we can stand apart from and choose among with the aid of some formal criteria. Furthermore, under this rubric, values become something we posit. The problem with this is that what can be posited can also be unposited. When values are conceived as mind sets or world pictures they lose authority. Instead of occurring in an implicit and open context, i.e. the human arena, becomes part of a recontextualized whole which does not consider their everyday context.

I think the above has occurred in Western thought about values. Furthermore, I think it impacts upon current breach between knowledge (or reason) and values (ethical and religious beliefs, emotive perceptions). Perhaps Dewey was struggling to find a way out of this type of thinking when he refused to be explicit in his treatment of growth. It is for us to decide, then, as a sharing community of valuing people, the direction toward which growth should proceed, as we endeavor to conserve and intensify the shared historical concerns that have endured.